

THE CONVERSATION

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Chinese President Xi Jinping wants to make China great again. US President Donald Trump has expressed similar hopes for his own country.
Reuters/Carlos Barria

Are China and the US destined for war?

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By 431 BCE, under the leadership of Pericles, Athens had become a formidable maritime power whose empire extended across the eastern Mediterranean region. Its challenge to the supremacy of Sparta, the warrior nation of the Peloponnesian peninsula, was obvious. According to historian and general Thucydides:

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Growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made [the Peloponnesian] war inevitable.

Graham Allison's new book, *Destined for War*, suggests a modern parallel in a rising power (Athens/China) causing fear in an established power (Sparta/the US) in which the necessary trust in one another is lost, and war becomes inevitable.

But the analogy has its limits. All too often the who, when and how of the next war have been confidently predicted. Very rarely has anyone got it right.

Athens and Sparta exercised power very differently from their analogous contemporaries. Over the four decades before the war, Athens had become the regional muscle, rather more like the US than China, extracting payment for providing security. The Athenians were primarily traders, providing a maritime security envelope while also securing resources for themselves.

Like the Chinese, the Spartans were focused more on maintaining territorial security. Most of the Peloponnesian peninsula was under Spartan control. Their strength came with the land and their exercise of a military regime depended on an often rebellious population of slaves known as Helots.

Athens had transformed its prosperity into a tightly controlled corporate empire. Similarly, today, the US has exerted considerable influence over strategic hotspots. Countries like Australia have effectively outsourced their security risks.

Sparta maintained a looser confederacy of alliances of which less was demanded, and less given. China too has used soft power, offering aid and investment across the Pacific and Africa, buying influence rather than extracting power.

We might see a certain aggressiveness about the US that reminds us of the image of Sparta as a warring nation. But, in fact, Sparta was somewhat insular and inward-looking. China's expansion might remind us of the growth of the Athenian empire, but Athens had little land and few prospects – it depended on an empire to secure resources, very different from the Chinese situation.

Allison is acutely aware that his analogy to the fifth-century war is a provocation. With his colleagues at the Belfer Center at Harvard, Allison's Thucydides's Trap Project has studied 16 significant conflicts from the last five centuries. Twelve of those led to war. The others only avoided war through significant adjustments in the attitudes and postures of both sides.

There is no doubt that China is rising. The GDP of China surpassed the GDP of the US (on purchasing power parity terms) in 2014. By 2019, it will be 20% larger. While the US can only manage a growth rate of 2.1%, China continues to grow by at least 6.5%.

As former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd once observed, China is experiencing "the English Industrial Revolution and the global information revolution combusting simultaneously and compressed into not 300 years, but 30".

The fearful West is apt to ignore the considerable internal tensions that China faces. The Chinese Communist Party has a social contract with its citizens: the price of authoritarian rule is to provide economic opportunities for all.

While the vast majority has prospered under its regime, inequality has risen exponentially between China's urbanised east coast and the rural hinterland. Balancing the forces for social liberalisation on the coast and economic prosperity inland requires withering complexities.

Ironically, as part of the “One Belt One Road” initiative, the Chinese bought the port of Piraeus, the Athenian port that was the axis around which the Athenian empire once turned.

But this highlights China’s distinctly bifurcated view, between a maritime expansion of influence and a new Silk Road, designed to compete with Russia for economic and political dominance in Central Asia. China is a speeding juggernaut, precariously balanced between its international and domestic aspirations.

President Xi Jinping wants to make China great again. Allison’s prescient analysis shows that, despite Xi’s nuanced understanding of China-US relations compared with US President Donald Trump’s infantile floundering on the world stage, the aspirations each has for his country are remarkably similar.

But, unlike the bipolar world of the Ancient Greeks, the international system since the Cold War has been characterised by multipolarity: China, the US, the European Union, Japan, Russia and India each has an opportunity to exercise power more independently, or perhaps interdependently.

Allison’s book makes a fascinating and worthwhile contribution to our understanding of the nature of power as a function of the nation-state.

Through his analysis of the four case studies in which war was avoided, Allison gives us “twelve clues for peace”, including practical examples of how Thucydides’s Trap was avoided. These include insights into the nature of leadership, how power is enacted, the opportunities and entrapments of alliances, and much more.

Thucydides spoke of the motivations of war being fear, honour and interest, and it’s the same today. These motivations come largely from within – they are not imposed by other countries from outside.

Ultimately, countries go to war when their respective grand strategies – the exercise of power in the world for national interest – become misaligned with the expectations of their respective domestic audiences. That is, the trap for both the US and China is to manage domestic expectations, and to harmonise those expectations with the exercise of international influence.

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